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Issues

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DISCIPLINE IN THE WORKPLACE —

A Critical Responsibility That Can't be Dodged

A workplace cannot function effectively without discipline. Like the larger society, it must have rules, procedures, and standards which everyone recognizes and abides by in order to get the job done efficiently and effectively.

Certainly, the best discipline is self-discipline, the kind that is evident wherever people are doing their best instead of trying to get away with something. Such an atmosphere usually reflects an effective manager. If the manager has earned the respect of the employees by knowing his business, if he is interested in his employees' gripes and suggestions, if he is fair and even-handed to all, the employees will do the job right and there will be few calls for corrective action.

But even in the best of all workplaces, no manager can take the governing rules and regulations for granted. Published documents which explain and clarify every guideline for employees are not enough. The manager still has an obligation to talk with his people about what he expects in the way of conformance with department or agency policy.

No matter how conscientiously a supervisor tries to prevent rule violations, some are inevitable. When they do occur, he must respond with a corrective measure that will discourage further slips. Throughout the disciplinary process, the manager should be as objective and as impersonal as possible. A rule has been broken; a penalty must follow. It is a matter of cause and effect rather than "I must punish you." Here are some reminders for a manager who is contemplating a disciplinary action:

- **Get the facts.** Check all possible sources of information relevant to the incident. These might include policy statements, union contracts, work records, and witnesses. Consider any extenuating circumstances. At some point, the employee should be interviewed and given an opportunity to talk about the matter from his or her point of view.
- **Let the punishment fit the crime.** The penalty — verbal warning, written reprimand, suspension, discharge — must be appropriate to the offense. If a union is involved, the manager may have to prove that a particular penalty is justified. Remember also that the employee will likely seek recourse in the appeals process. The effects of the penalty on the individual and on his or her work group should be weighed. Keep in mind that the purpose is to prevent further violations.

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TODAY'S TRAINING = CONTINUOUS LEARNING



Continuous learning — an ongoing process in which all of an organization's employees are taught new skills — is gaining in popularity as employers respond to rapid technological changes in the U.S. workplace, according to a report by the **Work in America Institute, (WIA)**. Employers increasingly will be replacing conventional training techniques with a continuous learning approach, the WIA study adds, as organizations continue to grapple with changes in products, services, technology, markets, and competition.

Learning vs. Training

The shift from traditional training to learning is "more than semantic," the report says. Training tends to flow downward, while learning can go downward, upward, or horizontally. While employees generally are treated as passive recipients of ideas and information in most traditional programs, the report notes, continuous learning requires them to "actively participate in expanding their own skills." In an organization that follows continuous learning principles, job-related learning becomes an everyday part of the job instead of being confined to special training courses or seminars, and employees are expected to share their job knowledge with co-workers. In general, continuous learning also requires employees to master the skills of their own jobs and other jobs in their work unit, as well as the relationships between the responsibilities and products of their own unit and those of other units and departments in the organization.

Institutionalizing Continuous Learning

Continuous learning doesn't just happen, the report says, it must be actively encouraged and supported. This may require changes in an organization's management structure and operating procedures, as well as "deeper and more penetrating" investments in and commitment to employee instructional programs.

Examples of mechanisms that organizations are using to foster a continuous learning approach include:

- **Learning by objectives** — A variation of management by objectives, LBO is often used to involve technical, professional, and managerial employees in the analysis of their own training and development needs. Managers and employees negotiate a written agreement on the technical or professional training the subordinate will receive for a period of time, usually six months or a year. At the end of the period, they review the outcome and negotiate a new agreement.

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- **Take action in private.** As calmly as you can manage to be, explain why you are taking this action. Concentrate on the facts; avoid any mention of personalities. Stay clear of emotional commentary. After you have made your case, remain cordial. Note once again that the action relates to a particular incident only. It should not be construed as a personal attack.

Few managers relish the prospect of disciplining an employee. It is, nevertheless, a critical responsibility that is neglected with hazard.

When the guilty go scot-free, their fellow employees become cynical. Their respect for the system in which they work begins to crumble, their work habits deteriorate, and productivity drops. The message: When disciplinary action needs to be taken, do so with justice and fairness, and avoid the temptation to dodge your responsibility.

Today's Training
(Continued from page 1)

- **Train-the-trainer** — These programs impart teaching skills to employees who are already "content experts." Companies using train-the-trainer methods, the report says, have found that content experts "learn the art of training more readily than training experts can master unfamiliar technical content." Additionally, experts "gain new insights and reinforce their own knowledge as they transmit it to others."
- **Continuous learning centers** — A CLC is an arrangement in which a group of employees who operate similar equipment come together to learn from one another how to achieve higher performance from the equipment. Management establishes the center, offers guidance and support, and provides the time and place for meetings. Membership in a CLC is voluntary, and meetings take place on company time.
- **Work teams** — Part of the wave of participative workplace innovations of the 1980s, work teams are small, permanent groups of employees who combine their different tasks to produce a shared result — a product, a service, or a component of either. Managerial as well as productive responsibilities may be assigned to the team.
- **Pay-for-knowledge** — These plans call for pay increases to be awarded as employees increase their skills. Often, they are integrated with the work team concept.

Essential Components

How does an employer create an atmosphere for continuous learning? The report identifies certain essentials:

- Learning must be viewed as an everyday part of each job, and employees must be expected to master the skills specific to their current assignments, as well as those of co-workers in their unit.
- Interactions between employees, teams, trainers, and managers must be active and encouraged.
- The union must be involved if the workforce is unionized.

Continuous learning — a shift from traditional training — is destined to become a common part of work-a-day life.

(Work in America Institute, Inc.,
700 White Plains Rd., Scarsdale, N.Y. 10853)



PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS: Making them work.

The key to a successful performance appraisal system is to make sure that employees feel rewarded for their job-related accomplishments, says William Weitzel, a professor of business administration and director of MBA and executive programs at the University of Oklahoma. Addressing a meeting of the Human Resources Management Association recently, Weitzel stressed that a performance appraisal system that imparts a feeling of accomplishment to workers will ensure that employees "work harder, take on more difficult assignments, and take more risks."

Weitzel offers managers the following suggestions for improving the efficacy of a performance appraisal system:

- **Make sure that directions are clear.** Contending that more than 50 percent of the time, managers do not tell employees what is expected of them, Weitzel emphasizes that the clearer the instruction, the greater the chances that a worker's performance will measure up to expectations.
- **When giving feedback, focus first on the positive aspects of an employee's performance.** A manager could, for example, ask employees to identify what they consider to be their most important achievements over the evaluation period, and then reinforce these successes.
- **When correcting performance shortfalls, again seek the employee's input in identifying areas of weakness and then help the worker plan ways to improve in these areas.** Weitzel stresses that "feedback should be given in comparison to a standard, not by comparing a person with another person."
- **Put performance improvements steps in writing, and follow up with periodic checks on the worker's progress.** "People do what you *inspect*, not what you *expect*," Weitzel notes.
- **Link performance accomplishments to rewards the employee deems desirable.** Though salary increases are the most prevalent form of reward, they are not the only incentive for good work.
- **Provide long-term career direction.** Today's workers, Weitzel observes, expect a lot more out of their jobs and want them to relate closely to their personal value systems.
- **Keep appraisal systems simple.** Maintaining that "any manager worth anything can tell you his best performers, his worst, and those in the middle," Weitzel contends that an appraisal system should employ no more than three performance categories. If numerical guidelines are assigned to performance categories, Weitzel adds, at least 20 percent of the workforce should be included in the lowest category in order to moderate its negative stigma.
- **Make sure that the appraisal system is legal.** In general, courts have given wide freedom to the use of managerial judgments in appraisals as long as certain minimum standards for each position are established, written appraisal records maintained, and training of appraisers is conducted, to ensure consistent evaluations.

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Discretionary Effort In The Workplace — Part III

A series on the Changing Status of the American Work Ethic

SYNOPSIS OF PART II (ISSUES, April 1986). In Part II, the existence of a commitment gap among American workers was verified, and its effect on world competition, the national economy, unemployment in the U.S., and the American standard of living, were all discussed.

It is unlikely that the U.S. can revive its competitive vitality without addressing the commitment gap.

Most observers agree that there is no single cause for the nation's declining economic vitality. A great deal of attention has been given to factors such as our over-emphasis on short term profits, sluggish capital formation, the trade policies of our competitors, the effect of government regulations, and the disrepair of the nation's infrastructure. Currency exchange rates are certainly a major part of the problem. A number of factors have caused the U.S. dollar to be overvalued, while some of our competitors, particularly Japan, seem to be deliberately undervaluing their currency — further undermining America's ability to compete. But much less attention has been given to the status and morale of our human resources. Although economists and leaders in business and government frequently give lip service to the importance of "human capital", they seldom have any concrete plan for upgrading the effectiveness of individual jobholders. Not surprisingly, they focus their attention on factors that are more tangible and easier to measure and to control.

The growth in discretionary effort, however, has brought the human resource factor to a position of critical strategic importance in the task of economic revitalization. In a economy dominated by low-discretion jobs, it was possible to tighten management systems while ignoring intangibles such as commitment, creativity, and a healthy work ethic, for the presence or absence of these intangibles made comparatively little difference to overall effectiveness. But in an economy characterized by high-discretion jobs, mobilizing these human resources is crucial to economic vitality.

Just as America's past economic success was based on its ability to adapt to the realities of the first industrial revolution, leadership in today's world economy will go to those countries who are most able to adjust to the new conditions. So far, Japan has been most successful in coming to terms with these conditions. Although exchange rates are a factor, much of Japan's success has been due to its ability to marshal its human resources. According to one recent analysis, for example, Toyota has a \$1,718 cost advantage (after shipping) over General Motors in producing a small car. Some of this advantage is due to superior technology (\$73.). Some is due to lower wages and fringe benefits (\$550.). But about \$1000. of the difference is attributable to skill in utilizing existing human resources. Japan's skillful mobilization of the needs, abilities, and values of its work force dictates that America, if it wishes to be competitive, must also utilize its human resources to the utmost. In short, it must find a way to overcome the commitment gap.

Humor In The Workplace — It's No Laughing Matter

Humor used effectively and appropriately can be a powerful managerial tool. Simply put, it can also be good for an employee's career. In a five-month study of humorous interaction at a mid-sized company, David Baum, coordinator of training and development at Thomas Jefferson University, examined the relationship between a manager's use of humor and his overall performance. The results of that study indicated a strong positive relationship between the effective use of humor and high performance ratings for managers.

According to the study, *Managerial Humor: A Study of Effective and Ineffective Humor Styles and their Impact*, humor can help to convey messages, increase attention spans, relieve tension, and keep problems in perspective. Not all forms of humor, however, work as well as others. The study revealed clear differences between effective and ineffective humor styles. The most effective and appreciated managers used humor that was spontaneous, sometimes directed at themselves, and benevolent when directed at others. These managers were willing to share the limelight and encouraged the use of humor by others. Sarcasm, not surprisingly, was seen as a destructive form of humor. Subordinates who are the target of sarcasm rarely have the opportunity to reciprocate and instead must keep to themselves (or express to fellow employees) any negative feelings that are generated.

The author cited a recent study of Fortune 500 companies that indicated that as many as 85% of the people fired today are let go because they can't get along with their coworkers. In this context, the potential value of humor is readily apparent. According to the study, effective humor users who are also hard working and competent are often better motivators, more persuasive communicators, and more successful in their careers. In short, a sense of humor can help get the job done.

Job Performance Often Improves With Age, Psychologists Find

A review of 13 studies on the link between age and job performance reveals little support for the "somewhat widespread belief that job performance declines with age," according to a study by two State University of New York psychologists.

After analyzing 13 studies conducted between 1940 and 1983, they find strong evidence of a correlation between performance improvements and increasing age. The psychologists also find that assessments of older workers' abilities varied depending on the type of measurements used. Older workers fared better when objective measures of their productivity were employed.

According to the authors David Waldman and Bruce Avolio, objective measures of individual productivity may be fairer than supervisors' ratings, which "may reflect a tendency on the part of raters to bias their appraisals, resulting in lower ratings for older workers." The psychologists conclude that "although chronological age may be a convenient means for estimating performance potential, it falls short in accounting for the wide range of individual differences in job performance for people at various ages.

They also find that "older workers who take on new and/or more challenging roles may be able to maintain (or improve) performance levels across the life span ... Offering older workers renewed stimulation at key points in their careers may help to maintain high levels of productivity."

Waldman and Avolio caution against personnel policies that discriminate against older workers not only because of legal or ethical considerations, but because of the potential loss of valuable personnel.

**Management is the development of people,
not the direction of things.**

**It is the totality of the process necessary
to challenge people to high purpose,**

**To involve them significantly in planning
and decision making, and to help them**

**Develop working relations among themselves
that are satisfying and productive**

**In accomplishing the aims of the institution
of which they are a part.**

— Author Unknown

**In the next ISSUES . . .
the health and role of the American work ethic.**

Communications: An Essential Tool of Management

*Part II of a series for public service managers
on effectively communicating with employees.*

Synopsis of Part I (ISSUES, April 1986). In Part I, the increasing need of management to communicate effectively and accurately with lower-level supervisors and employees was defined, and the importance of communications to an organization was outlined.

The need for management to control the flow of information; the role of management in fulfilling the need of employees to know; and the basic responsibility of management to censor the release of information when required for the good of the organization, were all examined.

COMMUNICATING IN THREE DIMENSIONS

Obviously, an organization's communications system must enable information to travel down from management to employees simply to get essential work done. Most knowledgeable officers also recognize the importance of having information travel UP, as Part I of this series has emphasized.

The transmission of information both *down* and *up* can usually be achieved by establishing a single chain-of-command system, under which each manager at each level is made responsible for passing information both *to* and *from* each of his or her subordinates. Thus, a message going *down*, the department head would tell each subordinate division head; each division head, in turn, would tell each section supervisor; and each supervisor would tell each subordinate employee. An upward message would follow the same path in reverse.

In addition to *upward* and *downward* communications, however, there is another information system dimension that is vital: *lateral*, or *horizontal*, transmission on *each* organization level. This takes the form of an *exchange* of ideas, often through meetings and conferences, among all department heads, all supervisors, and so on.

Don't Sabotage Lines of Authority —

As a means of making their own communications job easier, some managers use lateral channels for *downward* communications purposes. But having supervisor Joe inform supervisors Bill and Mary is unwise in several ways: first, you can't be sure that Bill and Mary will receive your message accurately; second, Bill and Mary may ignore it, because it comes from a fellow supervisor, rather than a more authoritative source. And third, such a system can often develop undesirable status implications: Bill and Mary may come to feel that Joe has an "in" with the boss, since he's the one who gets the news directly.

Role of Top Officials —

The effectiveness of your communications effort depends on your top management people. Officers must *want* to keep their employees informed, and must be willing to invest their time to achieve this goal. They must be prepared to devote *personal attention* to the communications program, since such important jobs as the following can seldom be successfully delegated to lower levels:

- **Formulating communications policies** — deciding what types of information will be disseminated, and what the results should be.
- **Establishing and maintaining communications channels** — deciding who needs to know what; assigning responsibility for passing information along; overseeing and exhibiting personal interest in communications programs; troubleshooting when problems arise.
- **Planning communications methods** — budgeting for communications needs; selecting and providing for adequate tools and personnel; directing the activities of the communicator.

Role of staff personnel —

The personnel officer and his or her staff whose job it is to know employees' attitudes and work patterns — can often give management valuable help in establishing and conducting a communications program. They may, for example, assist in determining communications needs by: conducting employee attitude surveys; pinpointing causes to problems and work errors; reviewing records of grievances and complaints; finding out reasons for turnover, recruiting problems, and the like.

In addition, staff personnel are frequently in a good position to review and evaluate the program as it progresses, to keep tabs on new information needs, and to offer sound recommendations for changes.

Role of the communicator —

Every successful project needs a leader — and your communications program is no exception. Unless top officers themselves have time to plan, coordinate, and carry out all communications functions, they will need to assign these responsibilities to someone else along the line. If your communicator must hold down other full-time responsibilities, give the communicator the staff needed to do each job effectively.

Next time in ISSUES . . . Part III of Communications . . . How to choose your communicator; what he or she does, and the role of managers and supervisors.

Deferred Compensation — an employee benefit with far-reaching advantages . . .

State employees can save for the future by participating in the deferred compensation program, a way of putting money aside without having to pay taxes on it, or the income it earns, until retirement when your tax rate is usually lower. Managers can assist their employees in learning more about deferred compensation by showing them an audio-visual presentation that clearly explains the deferred compensation program. To arrange to show this slide-tape production, call Don Boisvert at 277-2160.

This newsletter is sponsored by the state's three carriers of the deferred compensation plan.



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